

# A Modest Minimalism?

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My aim in this paper is to present and evaluate one version of the deflationary attitude to truth, namely the Modest Account, propounded by Wolfgang Künne in (Künne 2003). I introduce the deflationary theories of truth in the first part of my paper and present briefly the views of a more familiar deflationist, Paul Horwich, as a “stepping-stone” to Künne’s account. In the second part of the paper I give an overview of Künne’s theory and in the final part I present a dilemma that his account faces: either it is not modest after all or it is incomprehensible.

*Keywords:* modest account, deflationism, Künne

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## 1. Deflationism about truth

### 1.1 Introduction

We often say that some sentence or proposition, somebody’s belief or thought is true (or false). For instance, ‘Tartu is a town’ is a true sentence. ‘Peter thinks that Tartu is a town’ may be a true or a false sentence, depending on what Peter thinks, but Peter’s thought that Tartu is a town certainly is true (if the first sentence is). What is expressed by that sentence and what is the content of Peter’s thought (or belief) is usually called a proposition, namely the proposition that Tartu is a town.

So-called *substantive views* of truth claim that truth can be explained in terms of some other property: correspondence, coherence, utility etc. In any case, truth is supposed to have a nature that can be revealed by analysing the *concept* of truth (usually via analysing the truth-*predicate*). During last 100 years or so, starting with Gottlob Frege, several so-called *deflationary* views have been put forward in order to deny that truth has any essence or that it could be analysed in terms of something else. There are, of course, many versions of deflationism around and thus in some sense this label is not very

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informative (for a recent overview of varieties of deflationism, see Stoljar and Damnjanovic 2007). In fact, Künne advises not to use the term at all, but I hope that it would not be too confusing to assume, in what follows, that his position belongs to this broad family of views.

One might try to distinguish varieties of deflationism, however. Here is one way to do this. Some deflationary theories claim that truth is not a property at all, others admit that it is a property, but quite a trivial one. Those who belong to the second group can again be divided into two camps: one camp holds that truth is primarily a property of *linguistic items* (sentences, statements, utterances), the other camp claims that truth is first of all a property of the *contents* of those linguistic items, i.e. propositions. The theories I shall be discussing are of the latter kind.<sup>1</sup>

## 1.2 Horwich's minimalism

One of the best-known deflationary accounts is Paul Horwich's, hence I have chosen his position as a starting point for discussing Künne's views, which is the main topic of this essay. According to Horwich's *minimalism* (see Horwich 1998), the concept of truth is quite trivial, specifically it has no "underlying nature" that could or needs to be explicated or analysed. Unlike most predicates, 'is true' is not used to ascribe some usual sort of property to some entity (e.g. a statement or a belief). Being true is an unanalysable property, but that does not mean that the *truth-predicate* could not be defined at all (although the definition is meant to be only implicit).

The truth-predicate exists, according to Horwich, only because of a certain *logical need*. There are two main uses of it:

- 1) Often we want to say something about some proposition, but we do not know what proposition it is—e.g. we might only know that it is "what Oscar thinks". Using the truth-predicate, we may then utter sentences like 'What Oscar thinks is true.'
- 2) We may want to say something about a great number of propositions at the same time. This can only be done with the help of the truth-predicate, for instance: 'Everything Frege said was true.'

For any other need, the truth-predicate is dispensable.

Any declarative sentence  $p^2$  is equivalent (presumably in the sense of necessary equivalence, see Stoljar and Damnjanovic 2007) with a sentence

<sup>1</sup> I will thus not enter into the dispute over the question whether propositions are the right kind of truth-bearers. I shall also not discuss the arguments for and against the deflationary attitude to truth as such.

<sup>2</sup> A sentence of English or its translation into any other natural language.

of the form ‘The proposition *that p* is true’ (or, alternatively, ‘It is true *that p*’). The initial sentence has thus been converted into a noun phrase, the truth-predicate serves as the “de-nominaliser”, a device for restoring the sentential structure.

According to Horwich, the *minimal theory* of truth only contains what is expressed in the uncontroversial instances (i.e. the instances that do not lead to semantical paradoxes) of the *equivalence schema*:

(ES) It is true *that p* iff *p*.

The remarks about the adequacy of the minimal theory comprise the *minimalist conception* of truth.

The primary truth-bearers for Horwich are *propositions*, as was said earlier. The predicate ‘is true’ is (implicitly) *defined* by all uncontroversial instances of the equivalence schema, that is, by all propositions, expressed or unexpressed (only the paradoxical ones excluded). Thus, as there is an infinity of propositions that are the *axioms* of the minimal theory, the truth-definition is *infinite* (see Halbach 2001 for the claim that the instances of (ES) are to be regarded as axioms; cf. also Horwich 1998, 43).

In what follows, I shall concentrate on Künne’s theory, introducing it as being partly in the same business as, but also in important respects different from Horwich’s account. I shall not discuss other problems that both accounts might share.

## 2. The Modest Account

### 2.1 Overview and comparison with Horwich

Wolfgang Künne, in his very insightful book *Conceptions of Truth* (2003), praises Horwich’s theory, but tries to improve upon it. Künne claims that in his account he wants to capture a truism about truth shared by ancient Greeks and many contemporary philosophers, namely that the phrase ‘that is true’ is interchangeable with ‘things are as they are said to be’, or with something very close to this. But, instead of taking this truism as a “preparatory step towards more demanding accounts of truth”, Künne proposes to take this as “a firm resting place” (p. 334).<sup>3</sup>

At the heart of his *Modest Account*<sup>4</sup> of truth is the schema that is noticeably different from Horwich’s:

(MOD)  $\forall x (x \text{ is true} \leftrightarrow \exists p (x = [p] \ \& \ p))$ .

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all page references are to (Künne 2003).

<sup>4</sup> In his most recent writing Künne prefers the title ‘Modest (or Quantificational) Account’, see Künne (2008).

This is, according to Künne, “the *minimal definition* of (propositional) truth” (p. 337). (The notation ‘ $[p]$ ’ abbreviates ‘the proposition that  $p$ ’.) A semi-formal rendering of (MOD) that is relatively close to the natural language, is the following:

(*mod*)  $\forall x (x \text{ is true} \leftrightarrow \text{For some ways things may be said to be, } x \text{ is the proposition that things are that way, and things are that way}).$

(MOD) has several virtues over Horwich’s theory, according to Künne:

- (1) instead of consisting of an infinity of axioms, it is *finitely statable*;
- (2) unlike the minimal theory, (MOD) is meant to be a generalisation, a general claim about all truths, thus it tells us *what all truths have in common* (cf. Gupta 2005a, 2005b, Halbach 2001 for showing that Horwich’s theory has problems with such general claims);
- (3) it is also *conceptually minimal*—one of the very problematic features of Horwich’s theory is that one seems to have to grasp all other concepts first, in order to have the concept of truth (see Gupta 1993 for this objection). At the same time the Modest Account explains ‘true’ in terms of few logical operators and the concept of a proposition;<sup>5</sup>
- (4) whereas Horwich’s schema does not allow for *truth-value gaps* (it would be false for propositions that are neither true nor false), (MOD) allows them (using two types of negation, see pp. 351–353): it would not be wise, according to Künne, to commit oneself to the principle of bivalence, if one is a minimalist, because “a truly modest account of truth and falsity will make no pretensions to terminate the debate about that principle” (p. 333).
- (5) Horwich’s schema has the proviso that it does not cover the *paradoxical instances*, but (MOD) covers these too:

If truth-ascriptions sometimes risk being paradoxical, then no account of the workaday concept expressed by the truth-predicate would be faithful that did not share this feature: it would be objectionable if the explanans of ‘true’ were protected against the risk of occasionally exhibiting paradoxical features (p. 350).

What to make of this? It might be a virtue or a vice, depending on one’s attitude to the issue. If one wants to give a theory of truth where the everyday notion of truth is somehow made more precise, this would not do. But Künne wants precisely to elucidate the everyday notion, to give “a connective analysis” of it in the style of Strawson (cf. Künne 2008), thus if the notion of truth *is* in fact paradoxical, the account of it should not explain this feature away.

<sup>5</sup> That is why truth is only a “broadly logical” property, according to Künne, because the notion of proposition is itself not a logical concept (see Künne 2008).

(6) the instances of (Den)<sup>6</sup> are all derivable from (MOD), thus Künne's account explains all that is explained by Horwich's minimalism—but not the other way round. According to Künne, this amounts to saying that (MOD) is more fundamental than the axioms of the minimal theory (cf. pp. 353–355). Recently Künne has stressed, however, that he should not be misunderstood as claiming that the condition of adequacy of his account is that it entails all the instances of (Den) (see Künne 2005, 565ff).

## 2.2 Propositional quantification?

A peculiar feature one can at once notice when looking at (MOD) is that there are *two kinds of quantifiers* that are used in it. The universal quantifier ranges over the whole domain, but the existential quantifier is restricted only to propositions. In what follows, only the latter will interest us.

As Künne admits, many would claim that (MOD) is either incomprehensible or circular (pp. 356ff). Why is that? The existential quantification in (MOD) is *sentential*, i.e. the variable *p* is a place-holder for sentences. *Circularity* would follow if we would construe the quantification *substitutionally*, because the most usual way of interpreting this is with using the concept of truth. Or else one has to worry about what Künne calls the Argument from Conceptual Overloading.<sup>7</sup> If, on the other hand, we construe the existential quantifier *objectually*, then (MOD) would be *unintelligible*, because the last occurrence of the variable *p* is in the sentence, not in the singular-term position (e.g. Donald Davidson has for a long time objected to similar accounts along these lines, see Davidson 2001, 2005).

Künne proposes instead to read the quantification on the right-hand side of (MOD) as being an *objectual quantification over propositions* (pp. 360ff).<sup>8</sup> For this to be intelligible, he rightly claims, one should *widen* the notion of objectual quantification to cover not only quantification into singular-term positions, but also into general-term and sentence positions. The permissi-

<sup>6</sup> Künne uses the phrase “the Denominalization Schema”, abbreviated as (Den), for Horwich's (ES).

<sup>7</sup> Discussing Hartry Field's proposal to interpret substitutional existential quantifiers as abbreviating infinite disjunctions, Künne says: “If ‘is true’ abbreviates that infinite disjunction, then you cannot have the concept of truth without having, *inter alia*, all concepts expressible in English. Nobody has all these concepts, but every competent speaker of English understands ‘is true’” (p. 359).

<sup>8</sup> In his book Künne calls this a “higher-order quantification” but after criticism from several reviewers of his book he has later abandoned this label as misleading. As Marian David puts it: in second-order quantification variables range over sets or properties, in third-order quantification over sets or properties of those sets or properties etc. The sentential quantification does not fall anywhere in this hierarchy. See (David 2005, Künne forthcoming).

ble substituends for '*p*' express their values, instead of designating them.

As a support for this broader understanding of objectual quantification, Künne provides the idioms in natural language: 'Things are thus', 'This is how things are', 'Things are that way' or, in German, 'Es verhält sich so'. Thus the rendering of ' $\exists p (\dots p \dots)$ ' as 'For some way things may be said to be ... things are that way' (p. 364).

Assuming that one agrees with what was just said, there still remains the oddity of quantifying in two different styles at once, the nominal variable '*x*' and the sentential variable '*p*' in (MOD) having the same range. In his explanation of this, Künne makes use of the analogy with two ways in which we can introduce a *property* into an atomic sentence: e.g. both the predicate 'is wise' and the noun 'wisdom' can be used to do this. The first expression signifies the property *wisdom*, the other designates it. Only the first one exists exclusively for this purpose: our mastering of the second mode is based on our comprehension of the first mode. Sometimes we use these two modes in one sentence, as in this example by Künne, somewhat modified:

Ben is wise, and that is a good quality in a teacher.

To the two ways of introducing properties into discourse there correspond two ways of quantifying over properties, nominal and predicative.

Exactly the same thing holds for *propositions*, Künne claims. One can introduce a proposition into the discourse either by a sentence that expresses it (primary mode) or by a singular term that refers to it (can be grasped only on the basis of the first way). And we can thus also quantify over propositions in those two ways, e.g.:

- 1) However the oracle says things are, thus they are. (Sentential style.)
- 2) Whatever the oracle says is true. (Nominal style.)

In (MOD) we just use the two ways of quantification in one sentence. I concur with Künne in being unable to see any problem with it (see pp. 365–368).

One might make the following objection to the existential quantification in (MOD) (see David 2005). Taking '*x*' to be 'the Pythagorean Theorem', Künne claims (p. 363) that a proposition satisfies the condition expressed by 'the Pythagorean Theorem = the proposition that *p* & *p*' iff it is identical with the Pythagorean Theorem and true. But from (MOD) it should rather come out as: iff *the proposition that* it is identical with the Pythagorean Theorem and true, but this is nonsense. Künne suppresses the phrase 'the proposition that' when stating when the condition is satisfied. This makes it meaningful, but is not justified.

I think that Künne might reply along the following lines: the objection does not take into account the difference between expressing a proposition

and referring to a proposition. A sentence ' $p$ ' expresses a proposition, the nominalisation 'the proposition that  $p$ ' (or formally  $[p]$ ) refers to the same proposition. In 'the Pythagorean Theorem = the proposition that  $p \ \& \ p$ ' we have first the nominalisation that is said to have the same reference as the expression 'the Pythagorean Theorem', and secondly we have the sentence that expresses the very same proposition. Now, when laying down that a proposition satisfies the condition expressed by 'the Pythagorean Theorem = the proposition that  $p \ \& \ p$ ' iff it is identical with the Pythagorean Theorem and true, we are *talking about* a proposition, i.e. referring to it, thus also ascribing *truth* to it. In other words, in giving the condition, we are talking so to say with the help of the sentential variables, but when talking about when a proposition satisfies the condition, we are making use of the usual, nominal quantification. And thus the words 'the proposition that' are superfluous.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. A dilemma for Künne

In its essence, Künne's account appears quite compelling. There is, however, an objection to the quantification in (MOD) that I take to be a rather serious obstacle for Künne.<sup>10</sup> One can present it in the form of a *dilemma* for Künne's characterisation of propositional quantification. Either one loses modesty, or (MOD) is incomprehensible.

As we saw, the characterisation above of when a proposition satisfies the condition expressed by 'the Pythagorean Theorem = the proposition that  $p \ \& \ p$ ' uses the notion of truth. This raises the question whether there is not a circularity involved. Künne recognises this problem and says that here he is giving a *meta-level characterisation of a formal symbol*, not an ordinary-language counterpart of it. Consider an analogy: ' $\exists x (x \text{ is a dog})$ ' is explained by saying that it is true when there is an object that is a dog; here we are also not translating the formula into natural language, but characterise it on the meta-level. This is, however, acceptable only insofar as *there is* an intelligible and noncircular reading of (MOD) available in natural language. But is there

<sup>9</sup> There is another, more general worry that can also be overcome, I believe: How to justify that we can formalise our truth talk in two ways, e.g. 'Everything he says is true' as ' $\forall x$  (he says  $x \rightarrow x$  is true)', and as ' $\forall p$  (he says that  $p \rightarrow$  that  $p$  is true)'? How are the two translations related to each other and to the natural language original?

As said above, Künne addresses this with the analogy with the two ways for introducing a property into discourse. Analogously, a proposition can both be expressed and denoted. Of course, the exact relationship between those two formalisations is an interesting issue in its own right. In fact, Künne has, especially in his more recent work, written quite much towards illuminating this issue that to my mind amounts to the justification asked for (see Künne 2005, 2008). So I am inclined to say that no further justification for formalising truth talk in those two ways is needed.

<sup>10</sup> This objection was first presented by Marian David, see (David 2005).

such a reading? As Marian David puts it:

Variables of first-order objectual quantification occupy noun positions and function like ordinary-language pronouns. The variables of the ‘ $\exists p$ ’-quantification in the MOD-formula take sentence positions and are supposed to function like *prosentences*. (David 2005, 189)

Even if there in fact are *prosentences*<sup>11</sup> in the natural languages, the existence of phrases like ‘things are that way’ in itself does not guarantee that they function like genuine, i.e. *quantificational* *prosentences* (not just *prosentences* of laziness), and in particular that there are *natural-language quantifiers* that bind them. But Künne claims that ‘For some ways things may be said to be’ is such a quantifier.

Here one can see a problem: Künne’s reading of ‘ $\exists p$ ’ invokes “ways things may be said to be”, thus we are quantifying over ways, i.e. over states of affairs. But is not this already very close to the fact-based correspondence theory?<sup>12</sup> That certainly would not be good news for a modest theory of truth.

Answering to critics, Künne later reformulates this (see Künne 2008). His new natural-language reading of the right-hand side of (MOD) is:

$x$  is the proposition that things are a certain way, and things *are* that way.

But now there is no explicit existential quantification in the natural-language counterpart. And as far as I can see, it is quite difficult to find something that would not look like quantification over facts or similar entities. (For the universal propositional quantification Künne later uses the phrase ‘However she says things are, thus they are’, see Künne 2008.)

Thus, perhaps Künne can indeed silence the worry of being committed to states of affairs that his earlier account faced—and thus escape one horn of the dilemma—, but this cannot be a solution, because now we can say that as there is after all no natural-language equivalent to ‘ $\exists p$ ’, the account is circular and unintelligible. We are thus led to the other horn of the dilemma. Künne has still to show that the dilemma can be dissolved—that his Modest or Quantificational Account of truth can be given a non-circular semi-formal characterisation.

<sup>11</sup> A *prosentence* is supposed to be an expression that refers anaphorically to a previous use of a sentence, analogously to the functioning of anaphoric pronouns.

<sup>12</sup> Künne criticises this and other versions of the correspondence theory at length in Chapter 3 of his book.



#### 4. Conclusion

I have tried to show that although some of the objections to the treatment of quantification in Künne's Modest Account of truth can be overcome, there remains at least one problem with it that Künne has not as yet been able to counter. It consists in the fact that there seems to be no natural-language equivalent to the propositional quantifier ' $\exists p$ ', thus the account given by (MOD) is circular.

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